ST. NICHOLAS.

VOL. XXIII. NOVEMBER, 1895. NO. 1.

A FAMOUS FRENCH PAINTER.

BY ARTHUR HOEBER.

AWAY back in the early part of this century, before it had finished its first quarter—in short, in 1824,—a little French boy baby was born, who was destined to make a stir in the world and to have considerable influence over a great many American lads later on in his life. The town in which he first saw the light was Vesoul, situated in the northeastern part of France in a *département*—or, as we should call it, a county—known as Haute-Saône.

His parents were people in very moderate circumstances, the father being a goldsmith by the name of Gérôme, and the little boy was christened Jean-Léon. As the child grew up he developed into a bright, quick, active boy; and at no little sacrifice, for money was not plenty in his home, he was sent to a good school and afterward to college, from which he graduated at the age of sixteen years. With no social position and without friends in high places to help him, this boy nevertheless came to be one of the most famous men of his time, and to-day he is honored, famous, prosperous, and rich. He has more medals and decorations than he could ever conveniently wear, and wherever people talk about pictures his name is known as that of one of the greatest of modern artists.

The story of his life is inspiring, as showing what a boy may accomplish by pegging away seriously with one object ever in view. I should like to tell how Jean-Léon Gérôme conquered all obstacles and, not content with becoming one of the leading painters of France and of the world, began when nearly sixty to turn his attention to sculpture.

Of all his studies, both at school and at college, there was no branch that was half so attractive to the young Gérôme as drawing, and in this the boy made such remarkable progress as soon to be quite ahead of all his teachers. His father, who used to make each year a trip to Paris, to receive orders and to deliver his jeweler's work, on one occasion brought back a box of oil colors and an original picture by Decamps, one of the famous artists of his day. To the boy, the picture was an inspiration, and the paint-box an unmixed joy and delight. He copied the picture by Decamps, to the great admiration of his family and friends, and he felt that a new life was opened to him. There had come to live at the little town of Vesoul a gentleman who was on intimate terms with people in the great art-world of Paris. He saw this early

Copyright, 1895, by THE CENTURY CO. All rights reserved.

Digitized by Google

work, and, going to the father of our young lad, advised that the boy be sent to the French capital to study. He also gave him a letter to Paul Delaroche, the artist, then at the height of his fame; and, what was more to the point, this same gentleman made a liberal present in money to help the boy to pay his expenses. This, with what the worthy goldsmith managed to spare from his own modest funds, made quite a respectable sum, for in France a little money may be made to go a long way.

So Gérôme bade good-by to his people, and journeyed to Paris by slow stage-coach, railroads not as yet having been established. He entered Delaroche's painting-school, then, perhaps, the best in all France. Here his master became greatly interested in the boy, while the youth was equally attracted to the teacher. Before long the teacher had his promising young pupil drawing outlines for him on his great picture, now in the gallery of Versailles, "Napoleon Crossing the Alps."

Unhappily, the school-boys of those days took great delight in the stupid practice of hazing—a custom that is as unfair and unmanly as it is foolish. New pupils were made uncomfortable and even utterly miserable. Their studies were interfered with, their valuable time was wasted, though many of them were poor and could ill afford to lose it. In short, so much disorder and rioting took place in the class-rooms that finally a freshman lost his life through this miserable horse-play. Then Delaroche, who had long been indignant at the disorders of the pupils in his studio, finally concluded to close it. While all this was taking place, Gérôme had been on a visit to his family in his native town; and, when he returned, his master, who had planned a trip to Italy, advised him to continue his studies with another distinguished Frenchman, named Drolling. The resolute young man, however, was not to be thus cast off, for he had a great admiration for his master.

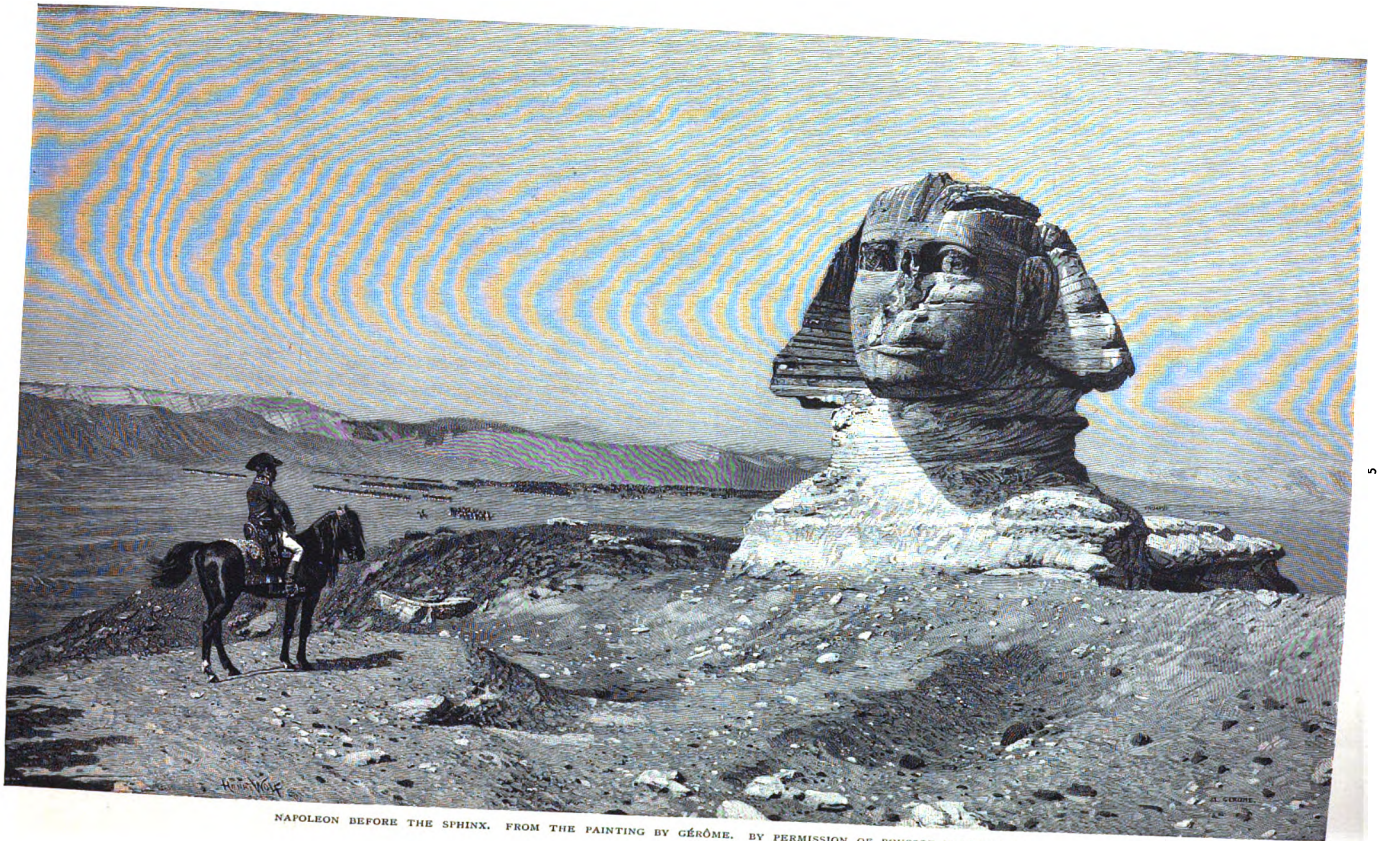
"No," he said; "as you are going to Rome, I shall go with you, if you will allow me; if not, then I shall follow you."

To this bold speech the master could only reply that the pupil was welcome to come, and the two departed together. A year was spent in Italy, Gérôme painting landscapes, rather than working after the old masters; and here his health, which had been anything but good, was greatly improved, so that he returned to Paris well and strong, and ready for any amount of work. The family was very desirous that the boy should compete for the annual prize of Rome, an account of which will be of interest.

The French nation has for many years owned a handsome palace in the Eternal City, as Rome is frequently called. This is known as the Villa de' Medici. It is a beautiful building, standing in the middle of a garden filled with statuary and fine old trees, commanding a view of the famous old city, and fitted up with superb furniture, tapestries, and pictures, the remains of the former greatness of the once powerful Medici family, who for so many years were high in the political affairs of Italy. Here each year are sent four young Frenchmen—a painter, a sculptor, an architect, and a carver of precious stones. These lads are chosen by a competition held at the School of Fine Arts in Paris every spring. The examinations are very searching, and the successful candidates are greatly envied, as well they may be, for, having won their honors, they are housed, fed, and provided with a studio and an ample sum of money to pay their expenses for four years—all by the French government.

So it will be seen that it is no small honor to have passed successfully through the ordeal; for not only is the opportunity for the delightful life under such splendid conditions to be desired, but the youth who gains the distinction of being the prize-winner is forevermore a marked man. His work is watched for, his future progress is noted, and his career may be said to be definitely made. The conditions under which the examinations are made are very strict. Preliminary trials take place early in the season. All who desire to enter inscribe their names at the Government School. Of course, only French lads may try. For the painters, a subject is given out,—perhaps some incident from the Bible, or an episode from a mythological story,—and sketches are made by the students. Twenty or thirty of the most promising sketches are selected, and the young men, thus chosen, are notified. These lads then make drawings in

Digitized by Google



NAPOLEON BEFORE THE SPHINX. FROM THE PAINTING BY GÉRÔME. BY PERMISSION OF BOUSSOD VALADON & CO.

Digitized by Google

"THIRST." FROM THE PAINTING BY GÉRÔME. BY PERMISSION OF BOUSSOD VALADON & CO.

Digitized by Google

charcoal of the subject. Another selection is made, and those chosen then make paintings. This time ten canvases are selected, and their authors go, as they say in French, *en loge*, which means that each man of the ten enters a small studio, where are an easel and materials for work, and he is allowed such models as are necessary to complete his picture. His first sketch of the subject given out is handed to him, and from this he must make a painting about three feet by four in size. He is not allowed to make any material changes in his composition, but must keep very closely to his original design. Outside his door sits an employee of the school, known as a "guardian," whose business it is to see that the student receives no help; nor may he leave the building, save under charge of this sentinel, who is watchful and keen, and not to be trifled with. Three weeks are allowed in which to complete the work. Then the ten canvases are placed in frames. The works are the same size every year, and the old frames do duty over and over again.

Now is an anxious period while a jury composed of distinguished artists deliberate on the merits of the works to determine the order of their excellence. Finally, a day comes when all is arranged. The ten pictures are placed in a gallery of the school, and each is numbered; the doors are opened, and the anxious crowd of students rushes in to learn the decision.

You may be sure that the happy Number One is a hero, and that he is carried around the Latin Quarter on the shoulders of his companions. The strain of the past few months is over, and we may forgive him if he gives way to a lot of boisterous nonsense for a few hours. To Number Two there is some consolation for so narrowly missing the great end he has aimed for — a sort of "consolation prize" being awarded to him, in the shape of a sum of money that enables him to travel for a year. Besides, he will compete the next year, and it frequently happens that the second man one season is the successful competitor of the year following.

The winning picture is hung permanently in the school, and the happy man goes to Rome. Each year he must send home evidences of his application and progress, that the State may know he is improving his time.

A GROUP FROM GÉRÔME'S PAINTING "LA PYRRHIQUE." BY PERMISSION OF BOUSSOD VALADON & CO.

Now, though all this would seem a splendid test of the ability of a young man, it not infrequently happens that lads of great talent fail to get this coveted prize, and that either by temperament, or nervousness, or inability to stand the strain, they do not quite come up to the requirements of the judges. So it happened with our young Gérôme. Though repeatedly rewarded for his drawings, when it came to the test he was judged inferior to his rival, Alexandre Cabanel, who carried off the palm. But though beaten in the contest Gérôme did not sit down and sulk. He was made of sterner stuff and he gave evidence of the courage, patience, and application that have stood him in such good stead all through his life, and carried him to such splendid fame. He said to himself, "It is evident that I must learn to draw and paint the nude figure"; so he set himself to the task with the utmost industry, and soon

A FIGURE FROM GÉRÔME'S PAINTING "THE CAMP GUARD." BY PERMISSION OF BOUSSOD VALADON & CO.

"THIRST." FROM THE PAINTING BY GÉRÔME. BY PERMISSION OF BOUSSOD VALADON & CO.

Digitized by Google

produced a picture of young Greeks that won high praise from all quarters. For this work he received a medal of the third class, a high honor for a youth but twenty-three years of age. From this he went on to a number of classical subjects, which, though somewhat dry and hard in painting, were always extremely interesting in the story they told.

And now there came an important epoch in Gérôme's life, for in 1855 he went to the East, traveling through Egypt and the Holy Land. Here he was deeply impressed by all he saw, and here he found a wealth of sympathetic subjects which inspired many of his paintings in after years.

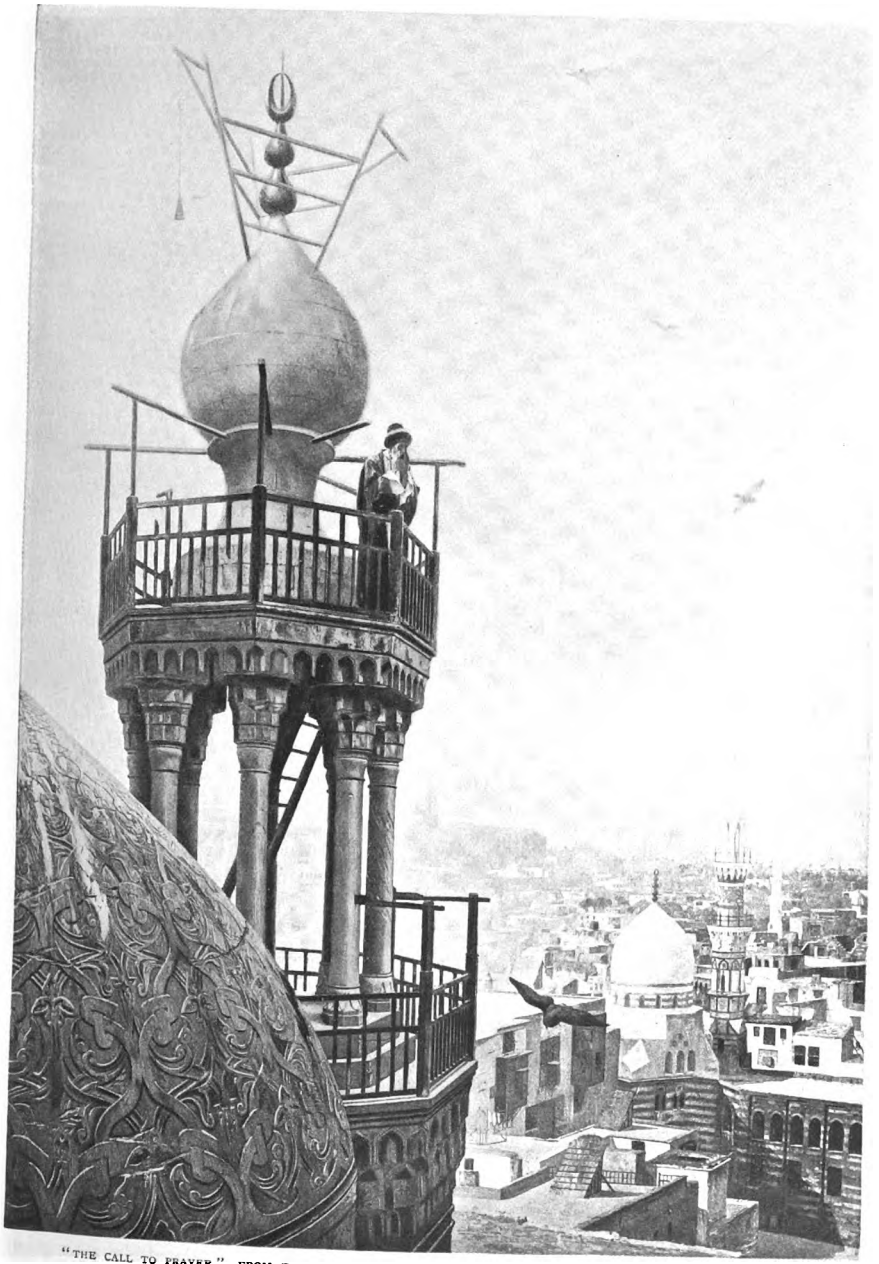
The curious costumes and customs of the Orientals, the attractive architecture of mosques, temples, and dwellings, the brilliancy of coloring, and the vivid contrasts of light and shade, appealed with great force to the young painter. He made many pictures of the people, at work, at their amusements, at prayer, in the fields, or on the backs of their faithful and much-loved horses. Each canvas bore the marks of great care, loving application, and faithful attention to every detail, always characteristic of this master. Honors began to come upon him thick and fast. In 1848 he received another medal at the exhibition, and at the Universal Exposition of 1855 not only did he get still a third of these medals, but he was created a Knight of the Legion of Honor, that much coveted distinction for which all Frenchmen strive. When this honor came to him, Gérôme had but just passed the age of thirty.

Gérôme has painted so many important pictures having a world-wide reputation, that it is impossible to go into many particulars about them in the present article. The illustration of "Napoleon before the Sphinx" will, however, give some idea of his remarkable powers of invention, and his fertility of ideas. The incident was suggested by the Egyptian campaign of the great Emperor. On the vast plains of the desert, rising solemnly up from the burning sands, stands the great mysterious stone figure, the origin or the meaning of which no man has yet been able to explain. In the distance we see the legions of the French army, while on his horse, calmly, and with speculative eye, sits the marvel of his age. The little man, humble of birth, without influence or money, rising by the force of circumstances and his own strong will and character to the mightiest position among the rulers of the earth, gazes steadfastly at the storm-beaten, time-worn monument of past ages. The contrast is full of suggestiveness.

Or let us take his "Thirst." What wonderful strength is here! On the hot, shimmering, sun-dried sands crouches the mighty King of Beasts, a very baby in his weakness, overcome by the desire to wet his parched tongue, and panting for a drop of water. What awful loneliness! What fearful solitude, and what a dreary waste!

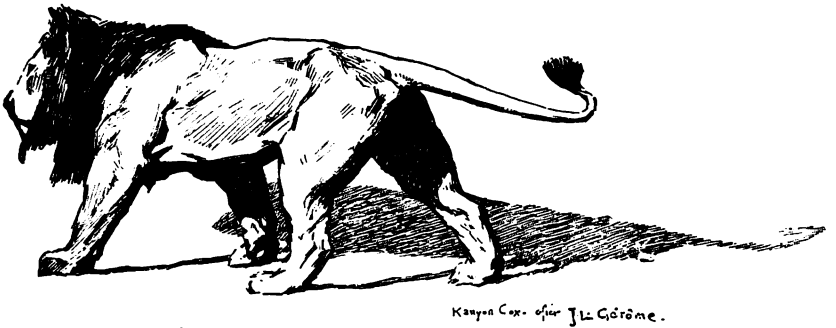
It were more pleasant to turn to the glimpse he gives us of the great oriental city whose housetops, minarets, and spires gleam under the brilliant Eastern sky, where the pious Mussulman calls the faithful to prayers. Here may be noted the artist's wonderful powers of observation, and the extraordinary finish, nothing, apparently, escaping his attention. So, too, in the "Pacha's Runners," where the reproduction does not, of course, give an idea of the color, though Gérôme's coloring is not always fine. His best skill appears in drawing and in the arrangement of his compositions. In the "Bull-Fighter" we find that the artist is quite as much at home in Spanish scenes as in classical, oriental, or modern French life. He enters into the brutality of the bull-ring, and, showing us the coarse picadors and the excited audience, brings the incident before us very vividly. In short, no matter what he undertakes, he prepares himself for the task with much earnestness and great deliberation. He makes careful studies, he looks well into his subjects, and he takes no end of pains. Pictures do not come of themselves, nor are they executed without almost endless trouble. Artists are generally supposed by thoughtless people to be more or less inspired, and to dash off masterpieces at will; but the truth is, a picture that has any claim to live and to deserve high appreciation is undertaken with as much forethought as the building of a ship. First the painter makes a sketch, searching out, in a general way, the best method of putting his idea on

Digitized by Google



"THE CALL TO PRAYER." FROM THE PAINTING BY GÉRÔME. BY PERMISSION OF BOUSSOD VALADON & CO.

Digitized by Google



THE LION FROM GÉRÔME'S PAINTING "SOLITUDE." BY PERMISSION OF BOUSSOD VALADON & CO.

canvas; then, after many changes and alterations, studies are made of the principal figures, of the draperies, and of the accessories. Now the scheme of color must be arranged, and finally comes the painting, and the painstaking completion of all the parts.

And so it was that Gérôme, like other great men, went carefully to work, achieving great success, advancing steadily year by year, his fame growing, and his honors multiplying. He had already, in the year 1858, been made one of the professors at the National School of Fine Arts, where he soon began to have a strong influence on the young students of the day, turning out many able pupils who have since become famous. Among these there have been a number of Americans, many of whom are prominent now; and not a few have themselves received in their turn medals and honors. There are some who wear even the red ribbon of the Legion of Honor. In 1867, at the Universal Exposition at Paris, Gérôme was promoted to be an officer of the Legion of Honor, and he also received the Grand Medal of Honor. This last distinction was repeated in 1874. Surely we might think that his ambition was satisfied, and that he might thereafter rest quietly, painting when the spirit moved him, and spending his declining years in the happy contemplation of a successful career. He was now fifty years of age, rich in worldly possessions, the owner of a handsome house in the fashionable part of Paris, and of a lovely summer home and a château on the river Seine, at a charming little town called Bougival. Everything that goes to make life agreeable was his, and yet—it was not Gérôme's way to

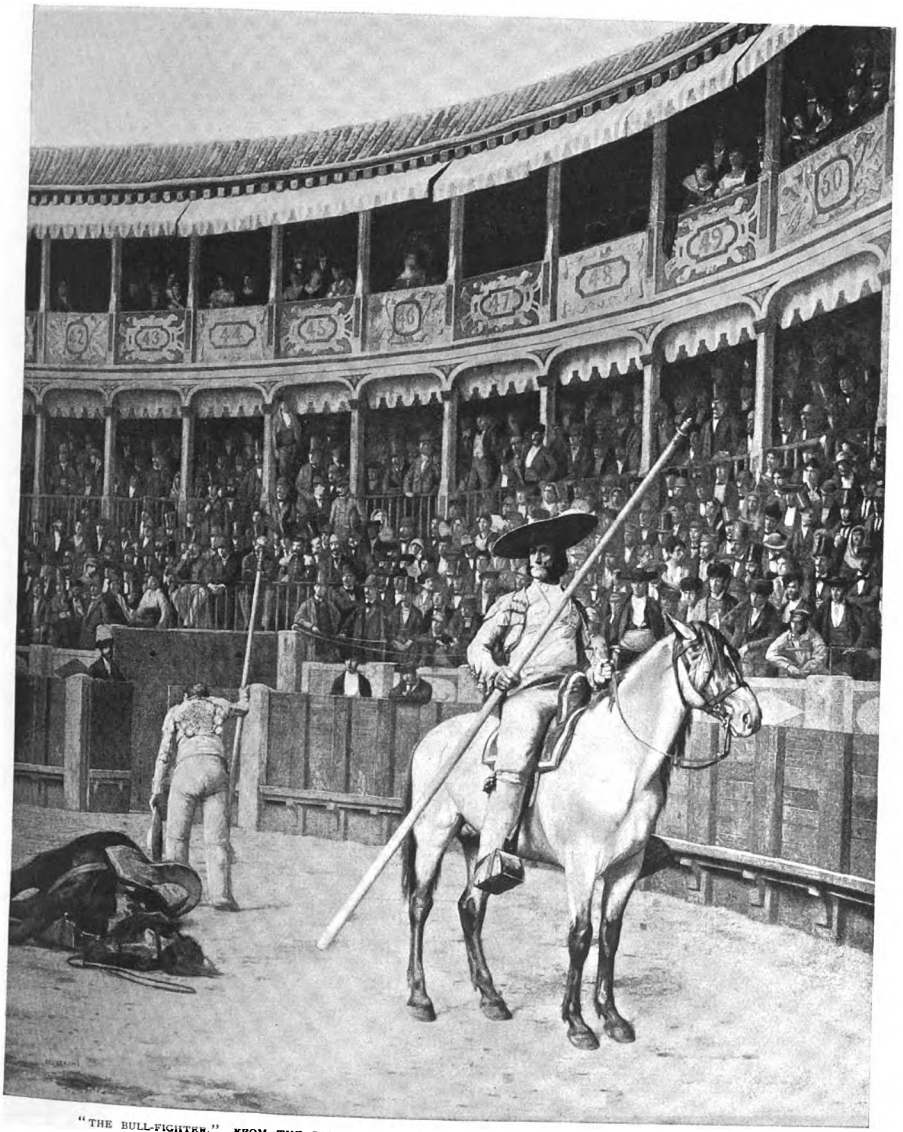
> "Sit idly down and say,
> The night hath come: it is no longer day";

for he felt with the poet

> "The night hath not yet come; we are not quite
> Cut off from labor by the failing light.
> Something remains for us to do or dare;
> Even the oldest tree some fruit may bear:
> For age is opportunity no less
> Than youth itself, though in another dress."

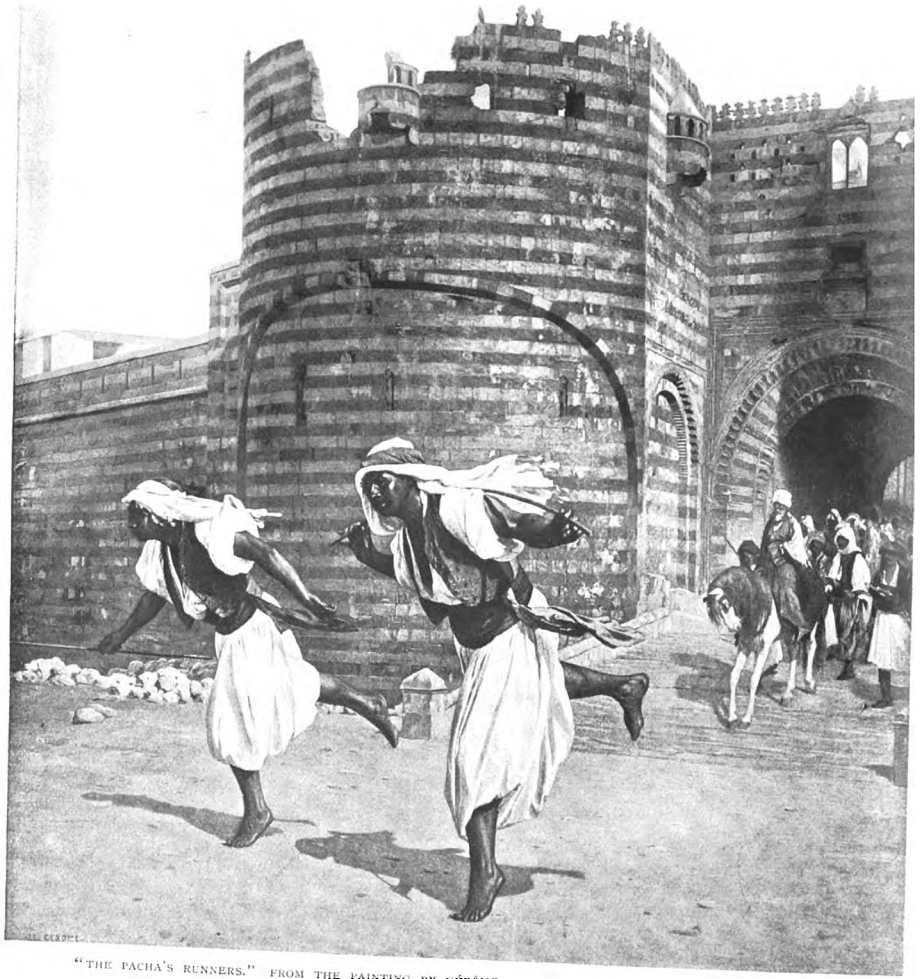
The great energy of the master could not be bottled up, and, like Alexander of old, he sighed for a new world to conquer, so he went to work quietly in his studio to study in clay forms and masses that he had heretofore represented in color. In short, he dropped his palette and brushes, and gave all his attention to sculpture. How well he succeeded is a matter of history; for, at the Universal Exposition of 1878, he received a medal for sculpture and the Grand Medal of Honor. We have seen how Gérôme has been appreciated in his own country; but it would take much space to tell in what high esteem he is held by other nations. He is an Honorary Member of the Royal Academies of London, Rome, Madrid, Brussels, Antwerp, Copenhagen, Rio de Janeiro, and many other cities; and monarchs have sent him many decorations. The old Emperor William of Germany made him an officer of the Order of the Red Eagle; King Leopold of Belgium created him a Knight of the Order of Leopold; William III. of the Netherlands appointed him a Knight of

Digitized by Google



"THE BULL-FIGHTER." FROM THE PAINTING BY GÉRÔME. BY PERMISSION OF BOUSSOD VALADON & CO.

Digitized by Google



"THE PACHA'S RUNNERS." FROM THE PAINTING BY GÉRÔME. BY PERMISSION OF BOUSSOD VALADON & CO.

the Golden Lion and an officer of the Crown of Oak; and Victor Emmanuel made him a knight of an Italian order.

All these honors and many more Gérôme bears with much modesty, like the big man that he is. His life has been, and is, a busy one, and he has little time to bother about much but his art, in his efforts continually to

Digitized by Google

improve himself. In a letter to a friend he once wrote:

> We are having days so gloomy that . . . it is almost impossible to work. Nevertheless I keep at it desperately, and expect to fight on to my last breath.

In another letter he says:

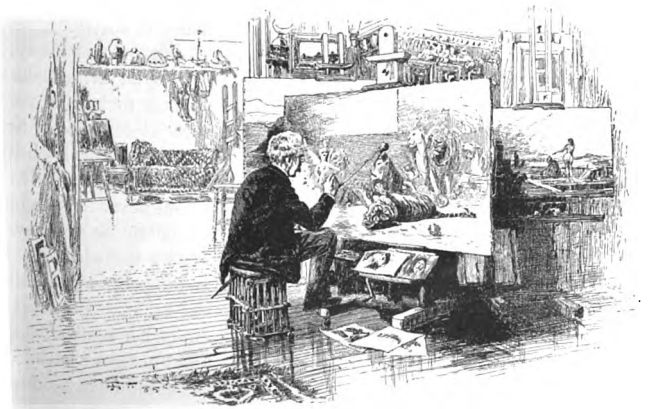
> I am at work early every morning, and only leave my studio when day has fled, and this since my youth. You see, I have been hammering on my anvil a long time. It is one of the examples I try to set my pupils, that of being an ardent and indefatigable worker every day and under all circumstances.

And this from a man of seventy-one years! Truly a splendid example is offered by his courage and wonderful zeal.

In person Monsieur Gérôme is a wiry, medium-sized man, with a fine presence, and very soldier-like in his erect carriage. His face is strong and full of character; his snapping eyes are searching and stern, and his fine head of gray hair and military mustache give him quite the appearance of a cavalry officer. Courteous manners, great affability, and a most distinguished air, make him an ideal type of gentleman. At a most absurdly early hour, when only milkmen, bakers, and laborers are stirring, he may be seen in the Bois de Boulogne, or on the Champs Elysées, astride of a handsome horse, taking his morning exercise; but long before the gay world of Paris is idling over its morning cup of coffee, the artist has returned and is busily engaged before his easel, or with his modeling-tools.

Twice each week he gives his forenoon to his pupils at the Government School of Fine Arts, on the Rue Bonaparte. His presence is eagerly awaited, and his arrival is the signal for absolute silence. On his entrance and after his hat and coat have been taken by one of the scholars, without loss of time he at once goes at the work of criticism, in which he is a model of brevity and conciseness. His unerring eye at once detects the faults and wrong tendencies of each student, and nothing whatsoever escapes him. A pupil may deceive himself, but not the master. Kindly advice to the serious, stinging rebukes to triflers, pleasant encouragement to hard workers, and useful counsel to progressive men — such are the results of his visits. He is very liberal in his ideas, and gladly welcomes any style of work so long as it is healthy, honest, and sincere. He takes great pride in the efforts of the pupils under him, and does not hesitate to climb many pairs of stairs to the most humble little studio, to correct and advise some poor, struggling chap at work on a picture, and Gérôme will sit and chat with him and give him the benefit of his years of experience. His kindness and consideration to Americans in his studio are proverbial.

Such has been the career of Gérôme, and thus has he, by hard work and by keeping one purpose in view, achieved great results. What he has done any lad may aspire to do. Not to all will come his success, of course; but to the youth entering on his life-work nothing should seem too great for which to strive. The future is in his own hands if he will but apply himself steadily and honestly to his task.



GÉRÔME AT WORK IN HIS STUDIO.

Digitized by Google